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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 000570

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/05/2016

TAGS: PGOV PINR PREL ABLD KS KN

SUBJECT: LAWMAKERS PROPOSE DENUCLEARIZED DPRK BEFORE
WARTIME OPCON TRANSFER

Classified By: Amb. Alexander Vershbow. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: A resolution introduced by a group of lawmakers opposing wartime OPCON transfer passed the Defense Committee on February 21 and is scheduled for a National Assembly plenary vote in the coming weeks. The leaders of the anti-OPCON coalition, including a former Defense Minister, met separately with the Ambassador on February 16, prior to ROK Defense Minister's Washington visit at which a final agreement was reached, to promote postponement of wartime OPCON transfer and to deliver a letter to Secretaries Rice and Gates (text at para 8). Endorsed by 142 lawmakers, the Coalition's letter argues that the transfer of wartime OPCON will significantly weaken deterrence on the Korean peninsula and recommends that the decision be postponed until certain conditions are met, including resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue. The Ambassador emphasized that effective deterrence and a combined ability to respond to any North Korean threat would be maintained under the future command structure. END SUMMARY.

ANTI-OPCON RESOLUTION MOVES FORWARD IN NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

¶2. (C) The National Assembly Defense Committee passed a resolution stating that the transfer of wartime OPCON should not occur before the resolution of North Korean nuclear problem. Initiated by 21 representatives of all parties, the resolution was passed by one vote (7 to 6) in the Defense Committee on February 21. The resolution is estimated to be introduced to the plenary on March 5. If passed by the plenary, postponing wartime OPCON transfer until the resolution of North Korea's nuclear issue will become a formal ROK legislative position. While the resolution is not legally binding, it will highlight the formal differences of opinion within the ROK on OPCON transfer. On February 23, Reps Hwang Jin-ha (GNP) and Kim Song-ja (DP), co-chairs of the "Parliamentarians' Coalition to Oppose Transfer of Wartime Operational Control Before the Resolution of the North Korean Nuclear Problem," held a press conference at the National Assembly press room in support of the resolution.

¶3. (C) In a separate meeting, Foreign Relations Committee Chair Chung Eui-yong (URI) told POL-MIL Chief that the resolution passed the Defense Committee only because three of its members, including the Chair, were absent to vote against

the resolution. Chung commented, however, that it was now "entirely possible" the measure would be passed by the plenary. Separately, Chief of Staff to Defense Committee Vice Chair Rep Ahn Young-keun (URI) and staff to former Defense Committee Chair Rep Yoo Jae-kun shared Chung's assessment that when introduced to the plenary, the resolution is likely to pass.

NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR SOLUTION BEFORE OPCON TRANSFER

¶4. (C) In a meeting with the Ambassador on February 16, Reps Hwang Jin-ha (GNP), Kim Song-ja (DP) and former Defense Minister Cho Seong-tae (Uri Party) argued the case for postponement of wartime OPCON transfer until North Korea's nuclear issue is resolved and to deliver a letter containing this message to Secretaries Rice and Gates. (See para 8 for full text of the letter). Hwang stated that the transfer of wartime OPCON should occur only after the following three conditions are met:

- resolution of North Korean nuclear problem;
- establishment of a peace system between the two Koreas; and
- establishment of greater mutual confidence between North and South Korean militaries.

142 lawmakers have endorsed the resolution. An additional 20 to 30 signatures are expected to be added in coming weeks.

¶5. (C) Former Defense Minister Cho explained that dismantlement of the Combined Forces Command (CFC) and cancellation of OPLAN 5027 would send a misleading signal to North Korea that the U.S.-ROK alliance is weakening. This

"missignal," Cho continued, would not contribute to a productive and speedy outcome of the Six-Party Talks. Cho and other supporters of the resolution believe that North Korean nuclear dismantlement should precede the disestablishment of CFC.

¶6. (C) Turning to regional implications, Cho stated that both denuclearization and democratization of North Korea are necessary to achieve a peaceful and secure Northeast Asia. Cho warned that it would be difficult to counter Chinese influence once it has "absorbed" North Korea, and therefore the long-term goal must include democratization of the DPRK as well.

CONTINUED U.S. DEFENSE COMMITMENT AFTER OPCON TRANSFER

¶7. (C) The Ambassador acknowledged that solving the North Korean nuclear issue is our common goal, but noted that the U.S. and ROK Defense Ministers had already reached an agreement in October 2006 to transfer wartime OPCON, with only the date still to be determined. After thanking the representatives for sharing their views, the Ambassador underscored that effective deterrence and a combined ability to respond to any North Korean provocation could be maintained under the future command structure, even if the North Korean nuclear threat remained. He questioned whether the dissolution of CFC would be a determining factor in North Korea's willingness to abandon its nuclear weapons, as Cho and Hwang suggested. The key was to carry out the transition safely, including writing new OPLANS, conducting exercises, etc., and to maintain the unity of purpose that was at the heart of the alliance, the Ambassador said.

ANTI-OPCON LETTER TO SECSTATE AND SECDEF

¶8. (U) The following is the text of the letter from the Republic of Korea Parliamentarians' Coalition Opposing Transfer of Wartime Operation Control Before the Resolution of the North Korean Nuclear Program to Secretary of State

Rice and Secretary of Defense Gates. The February 23 National Assembly press release mirrored the content of the letter.

BEGIN TEXT

February 16, 2007

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY
Republic of Korea

Hon. Condoleezza Rice
Secretary of State

SIPDIS
United States of America

Dear Secretary Rice:

We, 142 members of the Republic of Korea National Assembly, send this letter to you to express the Korean people's grave concern over the planned transfer of wartime operational control (OP-CON) between 2009-2012 agreed upon at the US-ROK Security Consultative Meeting on October 20 last year.

The security situation on the Korean peninsula is more perilous than ever. In particular, North Korea's nuclear test has not only worsened the security situation on the peninsula, it has also proved that we should not make any decision that could induce North Korea's miscalculation about our readiness posture.

It is fortunate that an agreement was reached at the Six Party Talks which ended on February 13. Nevertheless, there still is a long road of us until we accomplish the 'Complete, Verifiable, and Irreversible Dismantlement (CVID)' of the North Korean nuclear program. The fact that the North Korean nuclear weapon and ballistic missiles threaten the security of Korea and the region remains unaltered.

In this time of insecurity, transfer of wartime OP-CON is unwise as it will inevitably lead to dismantlement of the US-ROK Combined Forces Command (CFC) and significantly weaken our deterrence on the Korean peninsula. Thus, the Korean people are very much concerned about the risks the transfer of wartime OP-CON would bring to the US-ROK combined defense posture, and whether this would spell further uncertainty for Northeast Asia's future.

It is Pyongyang who is calling for withdrawal of the American troops and dismantlement of the US-ROK Combined Forces Command. It is also Pyongyang who stubbornly insists that it would not discuss any military issues with a Seoul that does not even have wartime control over its military. Knowing this uncomfortable fact, we cannot allow our own alliance making all of North Korea's wishes come true. This is the very reason why the absolute majority of the Korean people including hundreds of leading intellectuals and former defense and foreign ministers have so strongly opposed the transfer.

According to the recent opinion polls, over 70 per cent of the Korean people opposed the OP-CON transfer. This result tells the true view of the Korean people regarding the transfer.

What is important is not the time of transfer but the security environment of the Korean peninsula. We strongly believe the following three conditions must be met before making any decision on the transfer. First, the North Korean nuclear problem must be resolved. We mean the 'complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement' of the North Korean nuclear program. Second, there must be a peace system established between the two Koreas. And, third, there must be a strong mutual confidence between North and South Korean militaries. These are the requirements to minimize the impact of the OP-CON transfer.

The number of Korean legislators endorsing this letter currently stands at 142 but we are certain about additional joining of the ruling party members who have not been able to do so due to their party's situation. With the joining of the ruling party members, we are certain that more than a half of the National Assembly members will be standing in opposition of the OP-CON transfer.

Madame Secretary,

The Korean people are grateful for the United States for its sacrifice during the Korean War and contribution to Korea's economic development and democratization. We believe our alliance in the twenty-first Century should be developed into a more future-oriented and comprehensive relationship. For this purpose, it is critical to maintain a robust deterrence and stability on the Korean peninsula and the region.

Therefore, we oppose the transfer of OP-CON before a complete settlement of the North Korean nuclear problem. We cordially ask you that our concerns and will regarding this critical issue are taken seriously and considered in the future US-ROK discussion on the OP-CON transfer.

Lastly, we sincerely thank you for your effort for continuous development of the US-ROK relations.

A copy of the same letter will be delivered to Secretary of Defense Hon. Robert Gates.

Sincerely,

Republic of Korea Parliamentarians' Coalition Opposing Transfer of Wartime Operation Control Before the Resolution of the North Korean Nuclear Program

Seong-Tae CHO
Advisor, Member of National Assembly (Uri Party)

Jin Ha HWANG
Co-Chairperson
Member of National Assembly (Grand National Party)

Song Ja KIM
Co-Chairperson
Member of National Assembly (Democratic party)

This letter is endorsed by the 142 members of the parliamentarians' Coalitions to Oppose Transfer of Wartime operational Control Before the Resolution of the North Korean Nuclear Problem

END TEXT
VERSHBOW